

## Description of the Ocean Portal at NMNH

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) Ocean Science Initiative has three components: 1) the Ocean Hall, a new 26,000 state-of-the-art, permanent exhibit, 2) the Ocean Web Portal, a major Web site designed to educate and engage a diverse user community, and the Center for Ocean Science, a multi-disciplinary research center fostering collaboration between Smithsonian scientists and their world-wide colleagues. Each of these three components is centrally focused on the overriding vision of the Initiative – to promote ocean literacy throughout the United States and the World. This vision is shared by the partner institution in the Initiative, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

This paper describes initial considerations for the second component the Ocean Web Portal. The Portal is scheduled to open in concert with the Ocean hall in September, 2008. The paper further describes how NMNH and NOAA will develop the Web Portal in the years ahead.

## Complimentary Partners

Museums have learned to embrace the Internet as another means of educating the public and promoting their programs. Museums are building a solid track record of increasing visitorship by providing interesting and relevant content as well as using interesting interactive technologies, in particular for online exhibits. Museums are a trusted source for information, particularly for educators. These trends also hold true at NMNH. In fact, NMNH today receives more visitors on-line than walk through the museum doors – roughly 8 million per year vs. 6 million. Overall the combined Smithsonian websites welcome more than 85 million visitors annually with the NMNH websites among the top most visited Smithsonian sites. Our deep content spans across multiple natural history disciplines and reaches a wide variety of users from all walks of life and levels of interest and expertise. Consistent among the top most visited NMNH sites and pages are those presentations where we have successfully leveraged the educational link between outreach and research. Popular sites such as *Mammal Species of the World*, *Vikings: North Atlantic Saga*, and *Global Volcanism* continue to be a model for increased web visitors and greater public and educational impact.

NOAA is one of the nation's premier oceanographic institutions. NOAA has used the Web from its earliest beginnings as a critical medium for distributing an extensive array of data and information products. The NOAA.GOV domain is one of the most widely visited domains in the government.

With over 800 individual Web sites, NOAA's Web offerings are truly vast. They range from real time and near real time oceanographic data, statistical data on fish populations, coastal population, long term water quality, chronicles of oceanographic expeditions, management programs for marine protected areas, to a wide variety of educational programs and products. NOAA's Web offerings have true immediacy in times of major natural emergencies, such as hurricanes and storm surges. In these periods, information posted on NOAA's Web sites and updated around the clock, has lifesaving value.

Thus, these two institutions, each with long but very different histories and experiences with the Web, will work as one and with one vision in developing the Ocean Web Portal, to foster ocean literacy.

### **Why Develop the Portal?**

People have many motivations for having an interest in and caring about the Ocean. Some are engaged with the science and continuing discoveries. Others are fascinated with the mysterious life forms that have evolved in this alien watery world. Still others are passionate about preserving this natural environment. Some pursue their livelihood on the ocean, working long and hard days reaping the ocean's bounty, transporting goods, and protecting our coastal waters. And still many others use the ocean for recreation, enjoyment, and personal fulfillment.

And interest has never been higher in ocean resource science and management in government arenas. Recent blue ribbon reports by the U. S. Commission on Ocean Policy and Pew Commission have put into clear focus the critical importance of managing our ocean areas for the common good.

So there is already a community of many millions with keen interest in learning more about our ocean realm, and what we can do, as a world, as a nation and as individuals, to ensure that these benefits continue into the horizon. The Ocean Web Portal, as a companion to the Ocean Hall, is an unprecedented opportunity to truly engage and inform the public. And the institutional framework is in place.

The Smithsonian Institution has unparalleled strengths in engaging this interest and raising public awareness of the complete panoply of the ocean world, ocean science, and ocean governance. NOAA brings operational and management expertise and responsibilities that range from oceanic scales to local levels. And together, both institutions bring complimentary networks of major oceanographic and ocean education organizations that can be leveraged as collaborating contributors.

### **Who Is the Target Audience?**

Our primary audience is the general public. The Smithsonian has many decades of experience in presenting science in an engaging and understandable way to this audience. But the Web Portal will not stop there. It will also provide information useful to educators and students, ??, ??, and, ??

[##Carol, please fill in two or three more user groups.]

### **What Is the Portal? And What Will Be Included?**

Our vision of the Portal is inclusive. We recognize that even with our depth of marine expertise, most marine expertise exists beyond the Smithsonian and NOAA. For the general public and for the educational community, the Smithsonian and NOAA are trusted names. Currently, the NMNH Web site welcomes over eight million visitors per year. That number has been growing

steadily over the past several years. Information distributed through our Web presence will be seen and trusted by millions.

For the portal, our mission requires us to reach out beyond our walls to a broad array of scientific, educational, and resource management experts, and to effectively translate their wisdom, information, experiences, and knowledge so that it can be truly appreciated by our visitors. We will aggressively seek out content contributors and collaborators from the national and international ocean community.

Planning for the Web Portal is just beginning. Our goal is to have full initial plan with specific content sections by the summer of 2006. In these very preliminary stages we have identified several components of the Portal:

1. The On-line Exhibit. This will be an online experience to mirror the Hall. Recent online exhibits use interactive technologies and elegant design to enhance the user experience.
2. Educational Materials. This is discussed in another section of this paper.
3. Collections. The wealth of the Smithsonian is in the vast and diverse collection. NMNH has over 126 million specimens in its collection. 33 million of these relate to the Ocean. NOAA will add additional historical and contemporary collections from its spectrum of oceanographic activities.
4. Field Guides. These will guide the public through the identification of marine life forms.
5. Stories. Both NOAA and NMNH have many, many stories of ocean adventures and discoveries that can enrich the public. These stories will be designed to part the institutional drapery that often keeps the public one step removed, and guide our visitors behind the scenes.

Other components such as “what if” interactive games, a section on ocean mysteries, access to other data sources, and ways in which people can actively participate have also been identified as possibilities.

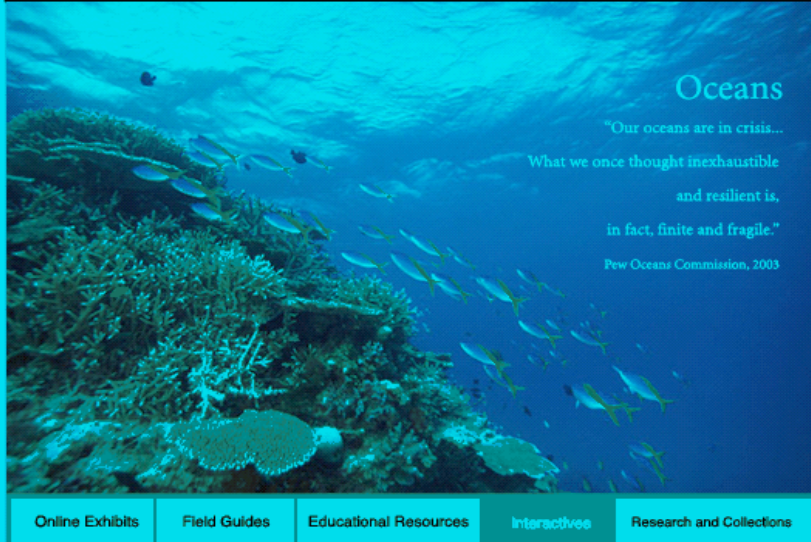
### **What Will Be the Initial Steps in Developing the Portal?**

The Web Portal will be developed over the next three and a half years. A core planning team of NMNH and NOAA content and Web experts has been assembled to guide this process. One of the first items of business for the core team will be to develop a list of organizations whose ideas and /or content should be proactively sought out. Appropriate vehicles for gathering these collective insights will also be examined. This organizational outreach will be a major effort of the initial year, when Web Portal planning is the focus of the effort.

Attached are two sample pages of what the Portal may look like:



Smithsonian  
National Museum of Natural History

[About the  
Museum](#)[Research &  
Collections](#)[Plan  
Your Visit](#)[Explore  
a Topic](#)[IMAX](#)[Events  
Calendar](#)[Shop](#)

## Oceans

"Our oceans are in crisis...  
What we once thought inexhaustible  
and resilient is,  
in fact, finite and fragile."  
Pew Oceans Commission, 2003

[Online Exhibits](#)

[Field Guides](#)

[Educational Resources](#)

[Interactives](#)

[Research and Collections](#)

[UPCOMING EVENTS](#)[NEWS FEEDS](#)

### The Allure of the Deep

Come meet our marine scientists in a day long event where they will talk about the allure of the deep and its many mysterious creatures. See some of the rare marine specimens from the Museum's collection of more than 33 million. Did you know that the Museum is also home to historic specimens from some of the world's most fragile marine ecosystems where collecting is no longer permitted? Hear about the scientists' field expeditions and broaden your understanding of the biodiversity and marine ecology in our oceans.

[Learn more](#)



### RESEARCH FEATURE

Submersibles and  
Cool Remote Control Vehicles.

The Museum's researchers represent the world's largest team dedicated to documenting marine biodiversity. But how do they go so deep?



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#### EVENTS CALENDAR

April 13, 2005 Ocean Symposia IV 10am -5pm

April 18, 2005 Sustainable Seafood Seminar  
with Carol Baldwin

April 28, 2005 Private Screening of James Cameron's  
"Aliens of the Deep"



Ocean  
creatures

Main Menu > Explore a Topic >

## Interactives

Navigating the Oceans

Submersible Dives

Build a Coral Reef

Lobster Fishing

#### BROWSE THE COLLECTION

See the unique collection of  
marine specimens of the  
National Museum of  
Natural History.

#### LEARN MORE

All students should know their  
lives depend on the Ocean.

- Ask the Experts
- Teachers Lounge
- Suggested Readings
- Classroom Ideas
- Images of the deep/downloads
- Research Blog
- Other Links

#### DO MORE

- Ocean Stewards [Learn more...](#)

